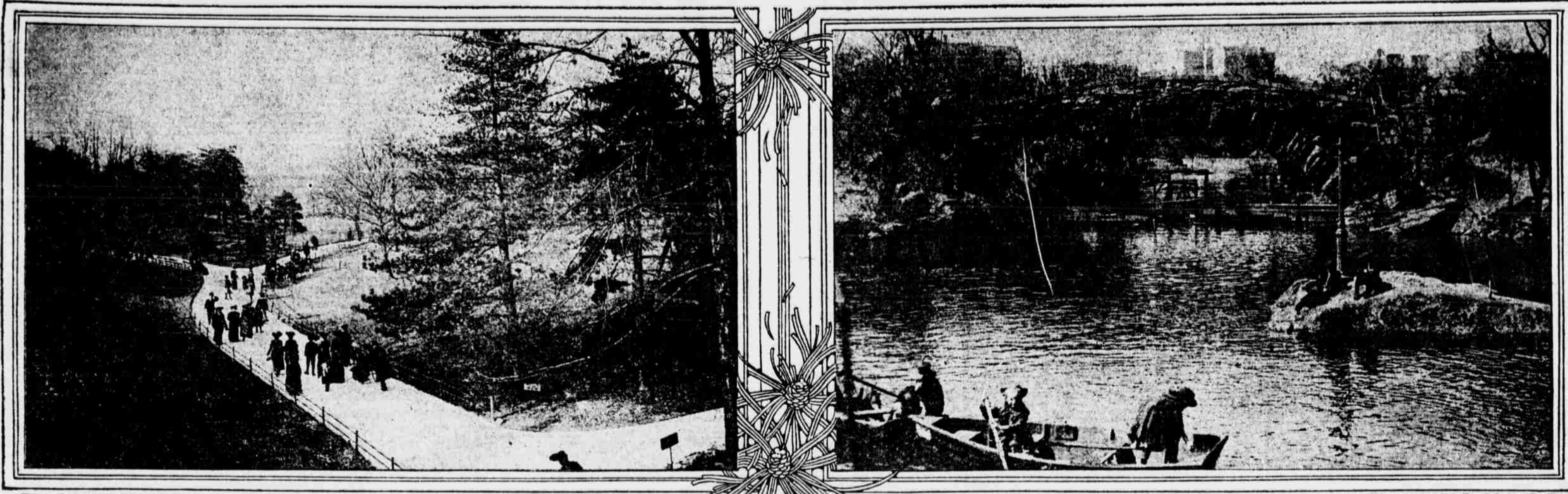


## The Original Landscape Dream of Central Park



The FIRST SPRING DAY in the PARK BRINGS OUT NATURAL BEAUTIES THAT ART COULD POSSIBLY FURTHER ENHANCE.

W. B. Van Ingen, Artist, Calls on Citizenry to Arise Against Obliteration of Beauties by So-called Improvements and Unchecked Vandalism

By ROBERT G. SKERRETT.

THE most beautiful possession in the keeping of the people of New York city is Central Park. It is the product of rare genius working together with nature. And, being such, it behooves our citizenry to do everything in their power to maintain it. They should oppose persistently and always any efforts, no matter how well meaning that may tend to mar the park's general scheme. Such is the keynote of an earnest appeal now made by W. B. van Ingen, an artist of note and a passionate lover of Manhattan's incomparable breathing place.

Mr. van Ingen has learned to know Central Park through years of intimate, sympathetic contact with every nook and corner of the whole reservation. As a mural painter he has drawn inspiration from many of its aspects, and by long study of its manifold charms he has become deeply imbued with the spirit and the intent of the men that planned it for succeeding generations of this bustling metropolis. Just as a general scrutinizes the potentialities of every bit of the terrain about him so Mr. van Ingen has grasped the niceties of the landscape architecture evidenced by the thought and labors of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux.

#### Touch of Master Hands.

As Mr. van Ingen puts it: "With the touch of master hands those original struck splendid chords, and because of those amazing harmonies it is all the easier for the heedless, I might say the irreverent, to interpose a discordant note. But simply because the park grips me as it does, because the more I see of it the more it means to me, don't let my opinion bias your judgment." Such was the way this widely known artist premises his criticisms of what he termed abuses or misuses of Central Park's design, when interviewed by the writer.

Continuing, he said: "Come with me and see for yourself. If I am wrong don't hesitate to say so. But before we start on our jaunt bear a few facts in mind. As far back as 1851, Mayor Kingsland sent to the Aldermen a special message urging the necessity of a spacious public park for the great city. Much interest had before then been aroused in behalf of such a project, and there was steadily increasing favor for such a plan. It was not, however, until seven years later that the matter actually crystallized and the city offered four premiums for the best plans for laying out the park. The first prize was \$2,000, the second was \$1,000, the third was \$750, and the fourth was \$500. Not particularly munificent sums in view of what the municipality subsequently gained in the way of art service by Messrs. Olmsted and Vaux on May 18, 1858, was accepted in the main as offered. Mr. Olmsted was appointed architect-in-chief and Mr. Vaux as his assistant. A working force was at once organized,

#### UNDULATING STRETCHES OF CHANGEFUL GREEN AMID SETTINGS OF FOREST LAND WHICH BREATHE THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE FARAWAY COUNTRY.

and by the first of June the task of creating the reservation was begun—such was the zeal of the collaborators. "The dominating idea was to produce in the heart of Manhattan and within a rectangular space a little more than two and a half miles long north and south and something over half a mile wide a succession of rural pictures which should enable the denizens of the city to get beyond the streets and the oppression of flanking buildings. In other words, without leaving the municipal limits to reach an effective stimulation of the open country, and at certain points to enjoy the apparently transplanted ruggedness of the Adirondacks.

"It was not permitted that the arrangement should completely block cross-town movement from east and west. Therefore the designers were compelled to accept four transverse roads, which substantially divide the park into five rectangular units. These surken traffic ways were so cunningly flanked with trees and sloping banks that long vistas would carry the eye over the intervening terrain without betraying the presence of these thoroughfares. Gaps were purposely left in the arrangement of the trees to promote the sense of distance. Otherwise the view would have been restricted and the impression of five separate parks would have resulted. And yet what was done a few years ago along a part of the transverse road that links East Sixty-fifth with West Sixty-sixth street? Saplings were set squarely across the middle ground between Umple Rock and the lovely sweep of the green to the north! Unless these are removed, purpose of hiding a sunken road and in promoting the impression of breadth and exaggerated distance. "And now let us see what other topographical trifles do to make or mar the beauty of the landscape. Take, for instance, the broken contours and the rolling slopes of the open spaces where we stand, here at the southern end of the park. There isn't a straight line in any of the surfaces as developed under the guidance of Messrs. Olmsted and Vaux. Even the grassy areas are made up of ceaseless undulations

#### Screening a Lovely Picture.

"I purposely emphasize this as an example of misuse of the original design. The interesting trees are like a screen dropped before a lovely picture, and in this case the view serves the scenic purpose of hiding a sunken road and in promoting the impression of breadth and exaggerated distance. "And now let us see what other topographical trifles do to make or mar the beauty of the landscape. Take, for instance, the broken contours and the rolling slopes of the open spaces where we stand, here at the southern end of the park. There isn't a straight line in any of the surfaces as developed under the guidance of Messrs. Olmsted and Vaux. Even the grassy areas are made up of ceaseless undulations

#### ONLY A GREAT PAINTER COULD HAVE REPRODUCED ON CANVAS THIS WONDERFUL BIT OF NATURAL BEAUTY.

These tend not only to present infinite varieties of aspect from different points of view, but likewise to increase the wealth of color effect. There was nothing accidental about this; it was done for a purpose.

"And now, see what the utilitarian did when he had the power to make over the ball ground at the southwest corner of the park. Umple Rock, in all of its contrasting ruggedness, rises from a setting of green, and this glacial worn mass of gneiss is typical of the geological outcroppings which prevailed there before many thousands of dollars were spent to clear away an ample area for ball players. But though the intent was to produce a ball ground, still the grassy area was to be a thing of beauty, and softly rolling waves of turf were called into being. There for years the youths of the city were quite content to bat away. And then the desire to change things mistakenly for the better gripped an erstwhile Commissioner of Parks.

"For two years the area was fenced in—denied the pleasure lover—while the ground was ploughed up, levelled and reseeded. All of the former undulations were ruthlessly rolled out, and the result as we see it now is a flat, uneventful area that is as dissonant in that setting as a false note in an otherwise melodious chord.

"The explanation was that the baseball player to-day is more exacting than the boys of the past. Admitting this to be a fact, then restrict the use of that field to younger lads who have not reached a stage where they can't be happy on a diamond that falls short of present day athletic standards. The park was never intended for recreation of a nature calculated to destroy the naturally picturesque.

"And while we are in this southern end of the park let us see what this is doing to misuse the original design—grossly abusing one of the most artistic bits of the landscape artists'



THE SHEEP MEADOW, A LOVELY TOUCH OF THE PASTORAL.

cunning. I mean that portion of the pond which lies to the north and west of the Gapstow bridge. To-day, this water area is fenced in by wire screening, which interferes with the view and rudely violates the idea of the open country. It imposes restraint, and it is immediately borne in upon us that we are dealing with the artificiality of a zoological garden. Why? Because this shelter is found necessary to safeguard the eggs of the water fowl from rascally youngsters! And to make this haven still more secure the approach under the Gapstow bridge is crudely barricaded by an ugly fabrication of boards.

#### Police Protection Lacking.

"This is not only a misuse but an abuse of an area which was worked out with loving care to produce vistas that only a Claude Lorraine could have duplicated on canvas. Messrs. Olmsted and Vaux were keenly alive to the temptations that the park would offer to those predisposed to vandalism, and therefore they urged cogently and at some length the creation of a corps of park policemen, capable of looking after their delegated beats and feeling in complete sympathy with the purposes of the reservation.

"Simply because we have no such force available scenic charms must be

sacrificed. The duck pond used to be at the uppermost end of the lake and nearly in line with Seventy-seventh street. That nook was far better suited naturally to afford protection during breeding time than the site now given over to the aquatic birds, and its use involved no trespass upon a section of rare artistic value.

"Don't confuse the general plan of the park—representing intent—with developed details. The latter must necessarily grow as we continue to spend money upon the reservation, but whatever these additions may be they should be made to fit in with the broad conception of the primary scheme. Further, don't imagine that I am opposed in any way to alterations, but none of these should be made without a thorough understanding of the purposes of the particular environment concerned.

"The Gapstow bridge will answer admirably to bring out my point. The bridge originally placed at that position was condemned in the course of time, and Galen Howard, the architect designed the present structure, which seems to spring naturally out of its surroundings and to fit in exquisitely with the local scheme. It is unquestionably more beautiful than its predecessor, but even so, it is a part way failure. What is the reason?

"As every one knows who is at all familiar with the general plan of the park, Messrs. Olmsted and Vaux very carefully arranged a triple system of communication or travel. That is to say, they provided driveways, walks and bridge paths, and so disposed of these by means of sunken crossings and some forty-odd bridges that it would be possible for pedestrians to follow the pathways laid out for them without having to cross driveways or bridge paths with the risks inherent in such a course. And how was this principle of security violated at one

particularly hazardous point? Just in from the West Sixty-sixth street entrance the authorities built some years ago what was intended by them to be a children's casino. To reach that structure from the neighboring walks, frequented by nurses and little ones, it is necessary to cross on the same level a much frequented drive and a bridge path with a compound curve that makes it next to impossible to detect the approach of riders a few yards off. Here we have another example of the misuse of the park design.

"The same criticism which I directed at the leveled ball field is applicable to the space cleared for tennis courts north of the Ninety-seventh street transverse road on the east side of the park. There, with a view to 'improving' the ground, the undulating turf was cleared away and a bald, unsightly area of concrete substituted. This cost thousands of dollars and effected no benefit, because backstop nets cannot be set up, and for that reason the players have either to content themselves with a game that is modified battleship and shuttlescock or chase their errant balls all over the area—interfering with their neighbors and adding to the confusion.

"Turf courts would have been infinitely preferable and the gentle rolling surface of the landscape artist could have been retained. Please keep in mind that the park was never conceived as a potential resort of athletes or the sport loving who might call for well high professional accommodations.

#### Travel Made Hazardous.

"From time to time, and only as recently as two years ago, we have been told that the rectangular receiving reservoir, lying south of the Eighty-sixth street transverse road, was to be abandoned and the area reserved to be turned into a garden. Garden laid out upon somewhat conventional lines. Such a garden in itself might be very beautiful, but it would clash at once with the fundamental idea of the rural.

"On the other hand, if this space, no longer needed by the Department of Water Supply, were returned to the Park Department it would give the landscape artist something like thirty-five acres which could be turned into lovely, undulating open stretches of green which would supply just the vista essential to making the most of the prospective striking western facade of the Metropolitan Museum. Imagine how the planners of the park would look upon an interposed formal sunken garden! And remember that this violative creation would cost us infinitely more to establish and to maintain than the open country effect desired by Messrs. Olmsted and Vaux.

"To appreciate properly what Central Park is to-day and to realize what the site was when it was taken in hand by its designers in 1858, we should recall the fact that the area was at the start little more than a long, narrow tongue of rock, chiefly gneiss and mica schists contorted and upturned at every angle. The place was full of fallen trees, decaying vegetation, foul pools and swamps.

"When these enthusiasts told visitors that it was their intention to do their guests simply smiled polite incredulity. Many millions of dollars have since been spent in transforming that rugged wilderness into innumerable beautiful pictures. Some idea of the work entailed can be gathered from the records, which show that the two wheeled carts used to remove and to haul materials, if placed in a single line with their horses attached, would be long enough to encompass the earth on the equator and have six thousand miles to spare!

"Twelve Years at the Task. "To achieve the amazing results which charm us to-day, Messrs. Olmsted and Vaux labored devotedly and without cease for the twelve years in which they were free to carry out their scheme. They brought to play all of the exquisite art of masters of landscape architecture—principles which Nature has prescribed and the wise man has followed in simulating her world over. The truth of this was brought home to me when visiting that wonderland of the landscape artist, Japan years ago. Those cunning men of the Orient used the same expedients to affect the eye that Messrs. Olmsted and Vaux employed here in the heart of New York city.

"Ten years after I returned from Japan I took a Japanese friend to Central Park. I wanted his expert judgment, but I did not influence him in expressing his views. We had not strolled far into the picturesque depths of the reservation before my companion arrested me by a touch on the arm and the exclamation, 'How much this all is like home, like Japan!' That was the spontaneous tribute to the universality of the art involved and of the faithfulness with which the men responsible had carried out their mission.

"Messrs. Olmsted and Vaux planned

Continued on Eleventh Page.

The GAPSTOW BRIDGE. The UGLY BOARD BARRIER IS TO KEEP BOATING PARTIES OUT OF THE RESERVATION FOR WATER FOWL.

He Appeals for Adhesion to Masterly Design First Adopted, Adequate Police Force and Curb on Unwarranted Sacrifices Made for Athletics